

NT LESSON 29

“THE NUMBER OF THE DISCIPLES WAS MULTIPLIED”

(Acts 6-9)

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INTRODUCTION: The calling of members to labor in the Church may create dilemmas of resentment and difficulties of understanding. Den mothers may long for the light of teaching in a Gospel Doctrine class. WEBLO advisors may secretly covet the anonymity of the Nursery. We are frequently called to do things that we might prefer not to do, but nevertheless things which must be done.

Nehemiah, in one of the most boring chapters of the Old Testament, teaches a wonderful lesson about the different responsibilities of church members, and about the critical need for each to do his duty well.

Nehemiah 3 is a register of the assignments of various Israelites for work on the walls and gates of Jerusalem. The walls, destroyed during the Babylonian invasion of about 600 BC, are now being rebuilt. Look at the chapter and notice the names of titles of those who are doing their part. The high priest is repairing the sheep gate with the help of his brethren (3:1); Shallum and his daughters are repairing the wall next to the towers of the furnaces (3:12); Binnui is working at the corner near the house of Azariah. Everyone is in his place, doing his part.

You can imagine what results might occur if someone failed in his or her calling and left a breach in the wall—a breach that could be exploited by deadly enemies. So it is with us. We must fulfill our duties with devotion and cheerfulness so that Satan cannot gain entry through a crevice that should have been closed by us.

In lesson 29 we will see various officers of the Early Church at work, doing their duties, building the kingdom, and bringing souls to Christ. We will see Stephen building in Jerusalem, Philip laboring in Samaria, and Saul joining the work force in Damascus.

1. SEVEN MEN ARE ORDAINED TO SUPERVISE THE TEMPORAL WORK OF THE CHURCH.

Cultural expectations and diversities can be both a blessing and burden in any organization. Such was the case in the early church when

the number of the disciples was multiplied, [and] there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration (Acts 6:1).

It is difficult to imagine that this carelessness was intentional, but it was nevertheless troublesome. Such differences of perception or participation occur in our own day. Different units disagree over who will use the Cultural hall on Thursday evening. Basketball players are reluctant to surrender space for wedding receptions. Even standards of dress and appearance can lead to murmuring.

Church leaders, recognizing that fashions go in cycles, are sensitive to the rich cultural diversity within the Church. For example, they have recently held that clean, neatly trimmed and managed beards and long hair for men—as well as certain other fashions that to some might seem “trendy”—are acceptable for the temple, provided they are not inherently offensive or vulgar. In the tropics, certain attire that in the northern climes may be considered extreme is not only acceptable but mandatory. Proper allowances must be made for these differences (David S. King, “I Have a Question,” Ensign, Feb. 1993, 29).

We must expect that the “Grecians” and the “Hebrews” among us will never see and do everything in the Church in just the same way. That does not matter. Once certain fundamentals are established---“the unifying and saving covenants, ordinances, and doctrines of the gospel”---the differences among us must strengthen us.

As we move into more and more countries in the world, we find a rich cultural diversity in the Church. Yet everywhere there can be a “unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). Each group brings special gifts and talents to the table of the Lord. We can all learn much

of value from each other. But each of us should also voluntarily seek to enjoy all of the unifying and saving covenants, ordinances, and doctrines of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (James E. Faust, "Heirs to the Kingdom of God," *Ensign*, May 1995, 62).

This same diversity must exist in calling. The Lord does not expect everybody to do everything. The Apostles knew that the Kingdom required equity, but did not consider it their *primary* responsibility.

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2-4).

We would love to have President Packer teaching our Gospel Doctrine class, but it must not happen. He is building another part of the wall, and cannot leave his duty to do work assigned to another.

The call of additional officers in the Early Church is also a clear pattern for what we see in our own day. How many organizational changes have you seen during your own years in the Church? All of them are designed to increase our ability to bring souls to Christ and to offer his gospel and its blessing more effectively to the members of his Kingdom. Seven men were chosen and ordained to assist the Twelve in the work.

2. STEPHEN TESTIFIES BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN AND IS STONED TO DEATH.

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the Twelve. He was a man "full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people" (Acts 6:8). Some tried to dispute with him, but "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake" (Acts 6:9,10). Finally he was brought before the council, where, like Nephi and Abinadi, he was transfigured—preserved by the power of God—until he had delivered his message.

And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel (Acts 6:15).

I love everything about Stephen. I named a son after him. When I grow up, I hope I can be like him. A list of the qualities and abilities displayed by this man in Acts 6 and 7 is impressive.

1. He was worthy to be called by the Apostles to his work (Acts 6:5,6)
2. He had great priesthood power (Acts 6:8)
3. He was filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:10; 7:55)
4. He was worthy to be transfigured (Acts 6:15)
5. He had a wonderful knowledge of scripture and history (Acts 7:1-50)
6. He was fearless, saying boldly what needed to be said (Acts 7:51-52,54)
7. He saw the Father and the Son in vision (Acts 7:55-56) How many people can you think of that have had that experience?
8. He was pure and Christlike ((Acts 7:60)
9. He was willing to give his life for his faith (Acts 7:59-60)

When Stephen announced that he could see the Father and the Son, his accusers “stopped their ears,” threw him out of the city, and stoned him (Acts 7:57-59). Why do you think they reacted so violently? What was it in Stephen’s message that cut them to the heart? (Acts 7:54). Peter and John and the other apostles were preaching the Savior with equal or greater power. And while they had been abused and mistreated, they had not yet become martyrs. What did Stephen do that aroused such animosity?

3. PHILIP PREACHES AND PERFORMS MIRACLES IN SAMARIA.

Persecution caused the members of the Church to be scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. What did these religious refugees do in their new locations? “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). There is something noble about this willingness to share the message even when the opportunities to do so come as a result of inconvenience. Have you ever been required to spend hours in an airport because of a flight delay? *Preach the word!* Have business requirements taken you to unanticipated locations? *Preach the word!* Have unexpected circumstances forced you into spending time with strangers? *Preach the word!*

And now it came to pass that the sons of Alma did go forth among the people, to declare the word unto them. And Alma, also, himself, could not rest, and he also went forth (Alma 43:1)

Now while Paul waited for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him (Acts 17:16).

Philip [one of the seven called with Stephen] fled to Samaria, but regardless of what had happened to Stephen, he did not go into hiding. He “preached Christ unto them” (Acts 8:5). How effective was he (Acts 8:6-8)?

Simon the sorcerer lived in Samaria. With many others he joined the Church, apparently leaving behind a lucrative career. For he had

bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries (Acts 8:8-11).

I am intrigued by his response to the miracles of Philip. The record makes it clear that he had worked a few “miracles” of his own (Acts 8:9), but he knew that what Philip was doing was a different matter. “He continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done” (Acts 8:13).

The scriptures often speak of false signs and wonders (see Mark 13:22; 2 Thess. 2:8,9, etc). I believe that those who perform such works will always know the difference between what they do and what the true servants of the Lord do.

A dear friend serving a mission in California when with his companion to tent-meeting to watch a faith-healer at work. They walked in quietly and sat near the back, but the preacher saw them, and observed them quietly for a few moments. Then he walked down the aisle and whispered to them, “Will you please leave? I cannot do anything while you are here.”

What did Simon do when he observed the Apostles who had come from Jerusalem laying on their hands to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost (see Acts 8:18,19). What does that question tell you about the conversion and spirituality of this man? How did Peter respond (see Acts 8:20-24). Is there a danger when members of the Church focus too much on the sensational and miraculous elements of the Gospel?

The story of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch is a wonderful lesson for us all about missionary work.

- # The work is directed by the Lord: “And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert (Acts 8:26).” Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot” (Acts 8:29).
- # The work requires obedience: “And he arose and went” (Acts 8:27)
- # Involvement with the scriptures increases spiritual sensitivity: “behold, a man of Ethiopia . . . had come to Jerusalem for to worship, was returning, and sitting in his chariot read[ing] Esaias the prophet” (Acts 8:27,28).
- # Investigators need teachers: “And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readeest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:30,31).
- # Preaching and conversion always lead to the ordinances: “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38).

4. SAUL IS CONVERTED AND BAPTIZED AND BEGINS TO PREACH THE GOSPEL.

Saul’s persecution of the Church is presented as a major factor in the scattering of the disciples. We are told that Saul guarded the clothes of

those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58), and that he consented unto his death (Acts 8:1). But that is not all.

As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison (Acts 8:3).

With the saints scattered, Saul moved his operations out of Judea.

And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem (Acts 9:1,2).

That journey to Damascus changed Saul's life, for it was on that journey that encountered the Lord and learned the truth.

The conversation between the Lord and Saul suggests that Saul had already had some concerns about what he was doing. When he saw the light he fell to the earth

And heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks (Acts 9:4,5).

In the final phrase of verse 5, the Lord says, "it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." This is not a question. It is a statement. The underlying image is of a farm animal, perhaps an ox, being driven by a pointed goad with which his owner keeps him moving. The pokes or jabs with such an instrument often cause the afflicted animal to kick out in pain. Saul seems to have rebelled in some ways at some time against the motives driving him in his persecutions of the Christians.

But instantly in this story we begin to see into Saul's heart: "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). And of course he did it. He spent three days in blindness and fasting in the house of Judas in Damascus, praying and waiting till Ananias came for

him.

When the Lord called Ananias to heal Saul, Ananias debated the issue.

Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: and here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name" (Acts 9:13-14).

The concerns of Ananias were justifiable. No reasonable person would encourage a wolf to dwell with the sheep, and Saul had been a wolf. As already mentioned,

he made havock of the church [in Jerusalem], entering into every house, and haling [compelling] men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

Paul's repeated invasion of Christian homes and his arrest and incarceration of Christian believers is a heartrending image—an image that must have haunted and motivated him through all the years of his discipleship. And Ananias knew Saul had come to Damascus, "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

However, Ananias learned, as would so many others, that Saul was a "chosen vessel unto [the Lord]" (Acts 9:15) who would suffer great things for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16). This reality was as invisible to Ananias as it would have been to all of us. Hugh Nibley described the problem of being unable to see the hearts of people:

The gospel of repentance is a constant reminder that. ..the most wicked are not yet beyond redemption and may still be saved. And that is what God wants: 'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' (Ezekiel 18:23). There are poles for all to see, but in this life no one has reached and few have ever approached either pole and no one has any idea at what point between his neighbor stands. Only God knows that (Hugh Nibley in *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley*, comp. and ed. Gary P. Gillum (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Company, 1993), 6).

God knew Paul. He knew what Paul was and what he could become, and even though the potential hidden in this tentmaker's son was at first imperceptible to Ananias, it was nevertheless real. Paul knew that what God had found embodied in him might also be veiled in the hearts of others. Therefore, as Paul demonstrated on the stairs of the Antonia Fortress, he was determined to deliver his witness to everybody at all times. This courageous approach has always typified the greatest missionaries among us: those who have marched into danger armed with the word and their witness, determined to teach the truth.

Many years later, when Paul told of his conversion, he reported a question asked of him by Ananias:

And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).

"Why tarriest thou?" (Acts 22:16). Paul never *tarried* again. He "received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized" (Acts 9:18), spent a few days with the disciples in Damascus, and "straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). Thus began Paul's ministry, a ministry motivated by his testimony of Christ and by his determination to be a witness of Him "at all times and in all things, and in all places."

CONCLUSION: I do not have sons named Saul or Paul or Philip. But I love them as I love Stephen. These are wonderful men, riding the crest of an expanding, almost *exploding*, church. They carried their testimonies and the word to every available ear. These are men who have given their hearts and lives to Christ and his Kingdom. Our Church is growing as theirs did. What a need there is for members who will speak the word boldly and with great power, members who will love the Lord and honor his priesthood and love his scriptures and save his sons and daughters.

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